

# Leavenworth Papers

No. 8

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## *August Storm: Soviet Tactical and Operational Combat in Manchuria, 1945*

by LTC David M. Glantz

**Combat Studies Institute**

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027

**June 1983**

## FOREWORD

In this companion piece to *Leavenworth Paper No. 7, "August Storm: The Soviet Strategic Offensive in Manchuria, 1945,"* LTC David M. Glantz focuses on the operational and tactical levels of the Manchurian campaign, highlighting the techniques that brought victory to Soviet combined arms during the last days of World War II. In eight case studies, Lieutenant Colonel Glantz examines various kinds of military operations, from tank armies crossing mountains and desert to joint ground and riverine actions conducted over diverse terrain, from heavily wooded mountains to swampy lowlands.

The operational and tactical techniques that the Russians employed in Manchuria evolved during four years of war in Europe, were adapted to the situation in the Far East, and reflected an imaginative and flexible approach to combat. No one technique stood in isolation from the others. For example, Soviet emphasis on maneuver during the campaign was successful because units at every level were task organized, tailored to objectives, terrain, and enemy strength, and time-phased into combat in such a way as to bring unrelenting pressure on enemy defenses. Surprise was a decisive factor on all fronts as Soviet units prepared in secrecy, attacked at night during inclement weather, and moved across territory considered to be impassable by the Japanese defenders. Having relinquished the initiative to the Soviets, the Japanese were never to regain it.

That Manchuria represented the culmination of the Soviet military experience in World War II and the last theater level operation undertaken by Soviet combined arms is in itself reason for U.S. Army officers to study this campaign. Beyond that, the Soviet war in Manchuria is instructive on a more general level. On the one hand, it demonstrates the value in warfare of careful planning, methodical preparation, and imaginative and unpredictable execution. On the other, it warns of the consequences of complacency and of underestimating one's opponent. For the thorough analysis and detailed narrative that they bring to the Manchurian campaign, Lieutenant Colonel Glantz's *Leavenworth Papers* will stand as the definitive works on the subject.



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# Abbreviations

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## Soviet Forces

A	Army
AEB	Assault engineer-sapper brigade
BGBn	Border guards battalion
Cav-Mech Gp	Cavalry-mechanized group
CD	Cavalry division
FD	Forward detachment
FFR	Field fortified region
FR	Fortified region
G	Guards
HSPR	Heavy self-propelled artillery regiment
MB	Mechanized brigade
MC	Mechanized corps
MnRR	Mountain rifle regiment
MRD	Motorized rifle division
RBA	Red Banner Army
RBn	Rifle battalion
RC	Rifle corps
RD	Rifle division
RR	Rifle regiment
TA	Tank army
TB	Tank brigade
TC	Tank corps
TD	Tank division

## Japanese Forces

BGU	Border guards unit
IB	Independent mixed brigade
ID	Infantry division



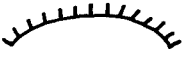













# Symbols



## Soviet

	Front boundary
	Army boundary
	Corps boundary
	Division/brigade boundary
	Infantry unit assembly area
	Tank/mechanized unit assembly area
	Cavalry unit assembly area
	Infantry unit deployed or moving
	Tank/mechanized unit deployed or moving
	Cavalry unit deployed or moving
	Self-propelled artillery unit deployed or moving
	Tanks in firing positions
	Self-propelled guns in firing position

# Japanese

	Field fortifications, defensive positions
	Fortified region, permanent
	Section position
	Squad position
	Platoon position
	Company position
	Battalion position
	Regiment position
	Brigade position
	Division position
	Division boundary
	Army boundary
	Area army boundary
	Kwantung Army boundary

# Introduction

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The 1945 Soviet campaign in Manchuria ended less than two weeks after it had begun. It took the Soviet Army about seven days to crush the Japanese Kwantung Army and end Japanese domination of northeastern Asia. The Soviets executed their self-styled strategic “Cannae”\* by launching three separate fronts\*\* along converging axes into central Manchuria (see map I—1). Shortly after midnight on 9 August, more than 1.5 million men commenced the attack. By attacking in the dark, on a broad front, along multiple attack axes, often across terrain the Japanese considered impassable, and, in many sectors, through drenching August rains, Soviet forces exerted maximum pressure on the surprised Japanese defenders. By organizing their forces to achieve a rapid advance in all types of terrain and by leading the advance wherever possible with armored forward detachments, the Soviets generated the speed necessary to overcome initial Japanese defenses and to preempt subsequent Japanese defensive efforts.

Soviet efforts yielded success. The three fronts penetrated western, eastern, and northern Manchuria, preempted Japanese defenses, and paralyzed the Japanese command and control system. The Russians bypassed, isolated, and annihilated Japanese covering forces, while Japanese main force units sought in vain to create a viable defense line. The massive scale of the Soviet attack underscored its audaciousness, relentlessness, and intrepidity.

Three combined arms armies and one tank army of the Soviet Trans-Baikal Front swept into Manchuria from the desert wastes of Mongolia, bypassed Japanese defensive positions, thrust across the undefended, yet formidable, terrain of the Grand Khingan Mountains, and erupted deep in the Japanese rear. Five days later, these forces threatened major population centers in Manchuria and rendered the Japanese high command incapable

\*In 216 B.C., during the 2d Punic War, Hannibal’s Carthaginian Army enveloped and destroyed a Roman Army at Cannae in what has since become the model for a successful double envelopment.

\*\*A front is equivalent to a U.S. army group.

**Map I—1. The Manchurian Campaign**

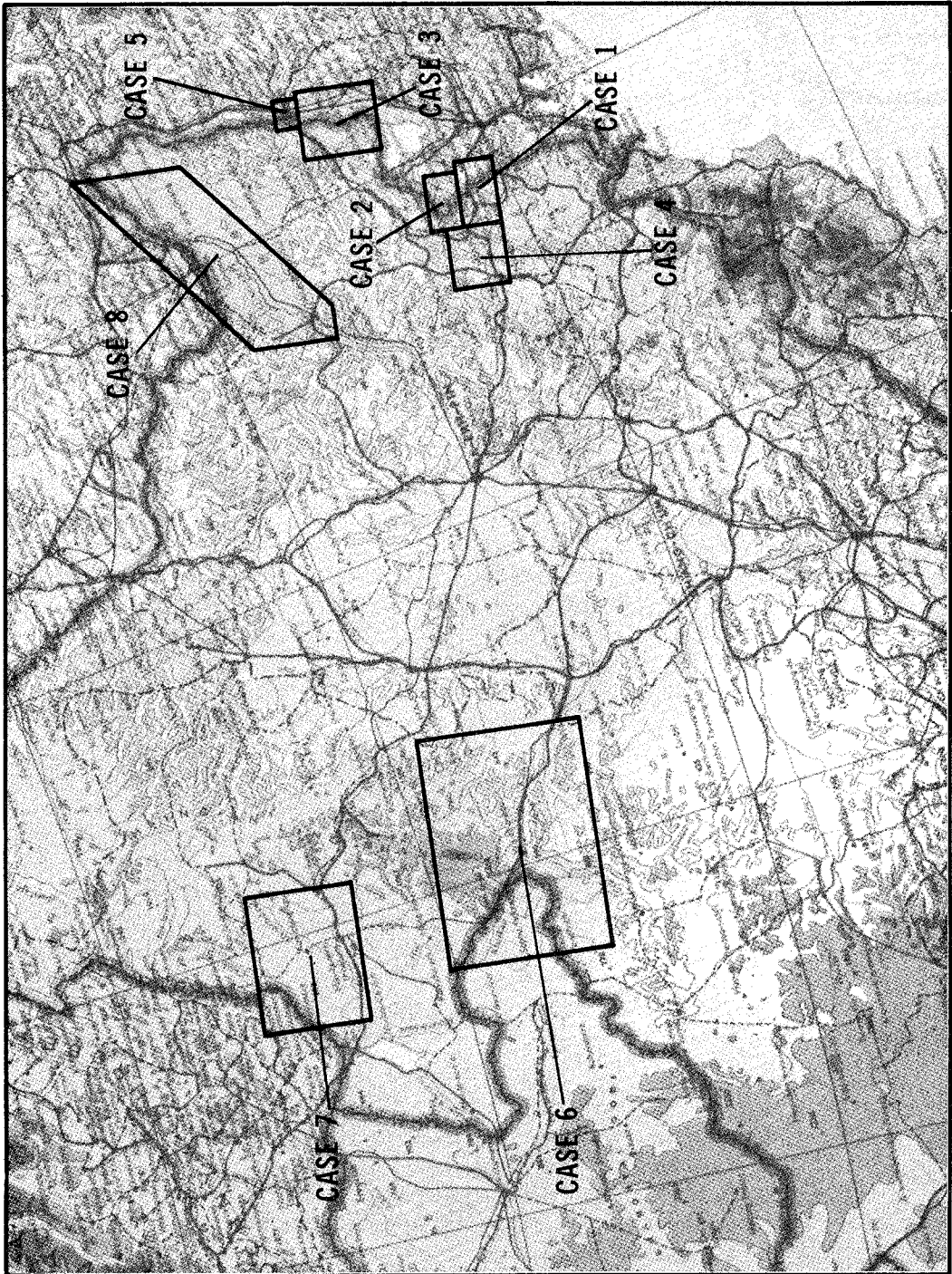


of effective resistance. Simultaneously, four combined arms armies of the 1st Far Eastern Front smashed through Japanese defenses in eastern Manchuria and, by 16 August, had secured the key cities of Mutanchiang and Wangching, thus collapsing Japanese defenses anchored on the formidable terrain of that region. Supplementing the slashing Soviet attacks from east and west, two Soviet armies struck Japanese defenses in northern Manchuria, completing the ring of fire around the beleaguered Kwantung Army.

Each of the eleven Soviet armies of the three attacking fronts advanced along its own distinct axis. Because the Japanese considered the terrain along many of these axes to be impassable for large military forces, they did not fortify them. Japanese miscalculation, combined with the Soviets' ability to achieve strategic surprise and to use imaginative operational and tactical techniques, produced the rapid and utter defeat of the Kwantung Army. Although the Japanese did not formally surrender until 20 August, by 16 August Soviet forces had in fact secured all the objectives necessary for complete victory.

Leavenworth Paper no. 7, *August Storm: The Soviet 1945 Strategic Offensive in Manchuria*, describes the full measure of Soviet strategic success. Strategic success in battle, however, depends upon the widespread achievement of operational successes, which, in their turn, result from cumulative tactical successes. While Leavenworth Paper no. 7 relates the scope of Soviet strategic and operational achievements in the Manchurian campaign, it touches only briefly on the tactical level of combat; the tremendous scope of the operations made it impossible to cover the tactical realm in detail without trebling the length of the essay. Yet the cumulative effect of numerous tactical successes contributed to the overwhelming Soviet strategic victory. Any study of the 1945 Manchurian campaign would be incomplete without a close scrutiny of the roots of Soviet victory—those tactical techniques the Soviets used to overcome the impediments of time, terrain, and enemy. The following eight case studies relate those techniques in detail. They have been selected because they best depict the wide variety of operations the Soviets conducted and because each case study examines army, division, or lower-level operations in regions characterized by distinctly different terrain (see map I—2).

The first case study, "Army Penetration Operations," describes Soviet army operations against Japanese defenses in the heavily wooded, hilly, fortified, eastern highlands of Manchuria. It includes a detailed description of the intricate planning required for Soviet 5th Army to penetrate the extensive Japanese defenses. Of particular interest are the operational and tactical techniques the army used to bypass and isolate Japanese fortified positions, thereby imparting momentum to the offensive. It offers an excellent example of maneuver at the lowest tactical level, across impassable terrain, and against strong fortifications.



Map I—2. Index to Case Study Locations

In "Division Advance in Heavily Wooded Mountains," the focus is on the attack of one Soviet rifle division across a roadless, hilly, forested region that the Japanese left only lightly defended. In order to accomplish its mission, the rifle division literally had to construct roads as it advanced. But the division also had to advance quickly enough to reach the Japanese rear before the Japanese could regroup and erect a viable defensive line. In this operation, the Soviets succeeded only through careful tailoring of combined arms units with strong engineer support at the lowest tactical level.

"Army Operations in Swampy Lowlands" shows Soviet forces succeeding in a region the Japanese considered unsuited for large-scale military operations. Two rifle divisions, with armor support, conducted a major river crossing and a four-day operation through swamplands to envelop Japanese defenses and isolate a major Japanese fortified region at Hutou in eastern Manchuria. This case study highlights the techniques the Soviets used to task organize forces in order to overcome these "insurmountable" obstacles.

"Set Piece Battle" details the course of battle on the approaches to the city of Mutanchiang in eastern Manchuria. There two Soviet armies advanced along parallel axes and struck major Japanese defensive positions east of the city. Soviet use of armor-heavy forward detachments imparted a momentum to the advance sufficient to preempt Japanese establishment of firm defensive lines east of Mutanchiang. Soviet forces destroyed Japanese units east of the city piecemeal and drove the Japanese units out of Mutanchiang more than ten days ahead of schedule. Although successful, this rapid Soviet thrust illustrates some of the drawbacks of conducting deep operations along separate axes.

"Reduction of a Fortified Region," written by Dr. Edward Drea of the Combat Studies Institute, focuses on what happened to Japanese fortified positions after the Soviets had isolated and bypassed them. Based on detailed Japanese and Soviet sources, the case study shows how the Russians went about reducing a major fortified complex. In the course of this action, the Soviets relied on air and artillery firepower and small tailored assault groups, rather than on costly massed infantry assaults, to systematically reduce each strongpoint.

In terms of terrain, the most remarkable Soviet operations in Manchuria took place in the west, where the Soviets massed large forces in remote areas and committed these forces to operations across seemingly impassable ground. Although 6th Guards Tank Army made the most dramatic advances in the west, it faced *only* the opposition of terrain. Therefore, "Army Operations in Arid Mountains" investigates instead the operations of 39th Army, which faced a strongly entrenched Japanese force flanked by the Grand Khingan Mountain barrier. In its attack, 39th Army adopted an indirect approach by attacking along two separate axes through territory the Japanese believed to be unsuited for military operations. This audacious

advance, led by maneuverable, armor-heavy forward detachments at every command level, took the Japanese utterly by surprise, rendered their fortifications superfluous, and quickly brushed aside the resisting Japanese units.

Of all the operational and tactical techniques the Soviets used in Manchuria, the creation and employment of forward detachments proved most valuable. Their tailored structure and bold, deep operations, made forward detachments the most innovative aspect of the campaign, one that both created and preserved the momentum of the Soviet advance. "Forward Detachment Deep Operations" investigates the success of one such forward detachment, the 205th Tank Brigade.

The river systems of northeastern Manchuria, with their associated swamps and marshes, proved a major obstacle to offensive undertakings and forced the Soviets to conduct extensive joint amphibious operations. "Joint Ground and Riverine Operations" focuses on how the Soviets coordinated successful amphibious operations that achieved high rates of advance through a region almost totally impenetrable by ground forces alone.

As microcosms of the strategic struggle that occurred in Manchuria, these eight case studies illuminate the tactical details of combat. They also surface the human dimension of battle. Ultimately, it is the performance of the division, the regiment, the battalion, the company, the platoon commander, and above all, the individual soldier that determines the outcome of the battle. While at the strategic and operational levels of war the human factor is often neglected, at the tactical level the soldier becomes the dominant factor. Only close analysis of tactical level combat with its emphasis on the human element can yield lessons of real value about the art of war. With this thought in mind, I wrote these case studies.

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